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ABSTRACT

Two kinds of instruments, atomistic versus holistic, offer different approaches to the grading of writing. This paper briefly discusses the pros and cons of these two philosophies of grading. In addition, the paper presents a holistic, primary-trait scoring instrument that has been used successfully to judge editorials by breaking down the analysis into three essential components: claims, data, and warrants. The paper concludes that using this primary-trait instrument aids journalism teachers not only in pinpointing weaknesses in editorials but also in designing remedial solutions for students. Criteria for judging quality of claims, data, and warrants; two student-written editorials, are attached. (Contains 15 references.) (Author/RS)

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ASSESSING EDITORIALS: AN INSTRUMENT TO AID IN THE TASK

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ABSTRACT

Two kinds of instruments, atomistic versus holistic, offer vastly different approaches to the grading of writing. This paper briefly discusses the pros and cons of these two philosophies of grading. In addition, it presents a holistic, primary-trait scoring instrument that has been used successfully to judge editorials by breaking down the analysis into three essential components, claims, data, and warrants. The paper concludes that using this primary-trait instrument aids journalism teachers not only in pinpointing weaknesses in editorials but also in designing remedial solutions for students.

ASSESSING EDITORIALS: AN INSTRUMENT TO AID IN THE TASK

Assessing writing has been a problem for many journalism teachers. While we as experienced readers and graders may know intuitively that students have made progress since writing their last story, we can't always say explicitly how or why. This can leave students frustrated and unable to mend their ways in the next draft.

Two kinds of instruments, atomistic versus holistic, offer vastly different approaches to the grading of compositions. This paper presents the pros and cons of these two philosophies of grading. In addition, it presents a holistic, primary-trait scoring instrument that has been used successfully to judge editorials by breaking down the analysis into three essential components: claims, data, and warrants.

How best to measure growth in writing?

When faced with an essay to grade and students who need guidance before attempting a subsequent draft, we have two methods of grading that can potentially be informative about the progress of the student: a holistic vs. an atomistic approach.

Adherents to the holistic philosophy deem it superior because it is potentially more valid and informative (Lloyd-Jones, 1977). Supporters of the atomistic approach, however, find holistic approach lacking because of its seemingly amorphous methodology. They claim that breaking down writing into its rhetorical constituents is more reliable and renders good, hard data that are easier to communicate to students and account for grades.

Atomistic instruments

A good example of an atomistic approach to grading compositions is measuring mean sentence length. Designed in the 60s, this was thought to be the best indicator of linguistic maturity. To verify this assumption, Hunt (1965) analyzed writing samples ranging from 4th graders to adults and found that average sentence length increased with age, but he was not convinced it was a sensitive enough indicator of syntactic maturity. He subsequently devised another system of measurement, the 'minimal terminable unit,' or T-unit. A T-unit is a main clause, with or without a subordinate clause attached to it. Dividing the number of words by the number of T-units reveals the level of syntactic maturity.

Hunt's system was cosidered to be misleading since it ignored the relationship between sentence length, topic, purpose, genre, and psychological distance. Rosen (1969), for instance, found that "the nature of the writing task influences mean T-unit length at least as much as the writer's maturity does" (cited in Watson, 1983, p. 132).

Although the notion of T-units has its detractors, it has been used to investigate syntactic maturity across discourse types, and found that persuasive writing was syntactically denser than other types of writing (Cooper and Watson (1980); Perron (1977); and San Jose, 1973). Perhaps this density can be accounted for by Crowhurst and Piche's (1979) study, in which 6th and 10th grade students wrote persuasive, descriptive, and

narrative discourse for different audiences (teacher vs. best friend). They found the persuasive writing to be syntactically more complex, and that the more distant the audience, the longer the T-units. Although these data help us gain some understanding about how writing tasks differ, this atomistic approach does little to help us determine where students have gone wrong.

Holistic instruments

Despite the staying power of Hunts T-units, other researchers prefer an approach that does not focus purely on clause length, transitions, or any other "countable" aspect of writing. They deem this method misleading. When writing is analyzed in terms of its constituents, say, as Hunt's T-unit measures syntactic structures, one necessarily studies a subskill of the process, and conclusions drawn from such a methodology in writing can misdirect and misinform the researcher. Therefore, opponents to atomistic instruments conclude, any piece of writing needs to be studied and analyzed in its entirety.

Holistic instruments offer an alternate approach to atomistic instruments. Generally, a holistic instrument is any that still requires assessment of linguistic, rhetorical, or information features of a piece of writing but never calls upon the reader to stop reading to count or tally any one feature. The reader is given only a list of specified features or a general guideline of what to focus on while reading. The reader then rates the various features according to the level of proficiency for that particular trait (Cooper, 1977).

Various forms of holistic scales have been developed. Cooper (1977) cites several that vary in the kinds and number of features to be investigated in a piece. One of those scales, the primary trait scoring instrument, isolates subcategories of the universe of discourse (e.g., cohesion), and rates writing samples in terms of their aptness within the prescribed range. Although this approach breaks up the scoring process into categories just as its atomistic counterpart does, this one focuses on aspects of a composition that can be judged more holistically. For instance, if I want to judge a composition's cohesion, I must read the entire composition and make a holistic judgment based on my impressions *of that component*. In contrast, an atomistic instrument may have the reader count the number of connectors and transitions throughout the essay. But according to proponents of the holistic approach, cohesion can be signaled in less overt, less quantifiable ways and thus may be overlooked or underestimated by an atomistic instrument.

Assessing editorials

While all good writing shares many of the same features, e.g., cohesiveness, certain genres have special essential components. A good editorial, for instance, is made up of a strong thesis statement, topic sentences that support that claim, and facts, anecdotes, and illustrations that enhance the strength of that claim. The stronger the "pieces" of the essay, the more persuasive the editorial.

A primary-trait scoring instrument works quite well when

assessing an editorial since these global elements, while in some ways are discrete, are very much intertwined and interdependent. In comparison, the atomistic features of syntax and mechanics (punctuation and spelling) have no direct relation to the persuasiveness of an essay and certainly are at too specific a level to even consider relevant in measuring, say, the strength of an argument.

The instrument

This instrument, adapted from Connor's (1990) and McCann's (1989) instruments, was designed to assess claims, data, and warrants (Toulmin, 1958), traits found in any kind of persuasive writing (See Appendix 1 for instrument used).

Claims (a.k.a. proposition) are "conclusions whose merits we are seeking to establish" (Toulmin, 1958, p. 97) and as "assertions put forward publicly for general acceptance" (Toulmin et al., 1984, p. 29). A claim can be identified by asking these questions: What are you claiming, where do you stand, what position are you asking us to agree to? (Toulmin, Rieke, Janik, 1979).

Data (a.k.a. evidence and grounds) are interpreted as support for the claim in the form of facts, experience, statistics, or occurrences. Data answer the question, what information are you going on to make such a claim?

Warrants are construed as amplification or further explanation of the data that clearly connects the data to the claim. These arise from laws of nature, legal principles, rules

of thumb, and engineering formulas and so on. Although often implied, warrants can often be discovered by asking how the writer can justify moving from these grounds to that claim. Given facts such as these, any person would conclude such and such.

Analysis focused on these elements since a good editorial contains all three. Yet they are not equally weighted as to their importance in the success the essay.

Claims, for instance, are more akin to the thesis statement of any good composition. They make assertions or declarations and are always capable of being proven true or untrue. If well stated, it orients the reader to the subject and viewpoint of the writer. If poorly stated, it leaves the reader somewhat at sea but usually able to rely on context to garner that information. Data are somewhat more important since they delineate the major points the writer wants to advance in favor of the argument. Usually, the fewer points mentioned, the less convincing the arguments; however, more does not necessarily guarantee success either. They must be relevant and strong.

Warrants are by far the most difficult aspect of persuasive writing yet the most crucial in convincing one's audience. They are the most difficult because they require a writer be aware of any possible objections to the viewpoint stated in the claim, and be exhaustive in the kinds of facts, illustrations, and anecdotes proffered. Citing a statistic then warrants the evidence to the claim. While supplying strong, relevant, and warranted data is

an element of any good writing no matter what the genre, it is especially important when a desired outcome depends on the strength of the arguments, it becomes even more important.

The scale can be broken up into more or fewer levels, depending on the assignment, the students, their level of proficiency, and time factors.

Applying the instrument

Appendix 2 presents two editorials on the same subject, although from opposite viewpoints, written for a feature-writing course.

After making an outline Steve's editorial, I gave each element in the instrument the following rating:

Claim - Cloning is dangerous because it can get out of hand. (Claim = 6)

Data - We screwed up the water hyacinth.

We screwed up the nutria. (Data = 2 because they are not exactly analogous to the human cloning situation. What are statistics on the cloning of cows, for instance?)

Warrant - Since we screwed up before with something so dangerous, we can screw up again. (Warrant = 2)

Because the student's claim, that cloning human genes can get out of hand, is clearly and unambiguously stated, thus earning him a 6. Yet his two pieces of data rated only a 2 (possibly a 4) by were not as convincing as they could have been. While it is true that our mishandling of the water hyacinth and the nutria should be warnings and thus support his claim, it

would be more powerful to point out if we had already tried experiments on humans or something closer to us on the evolutionary scale, such as cattle. His only warrant, that we "screwed up" before so we could easily "screw up again" is enough to earn him a 2 in that category. Yet we can easily see he is not providing enough data or enough warrants to fully convince the reader of his claim. Although it is a good attempt at a first draft, the essay needs fleshing out at both the data and warrant levels.

The second essay by Cynde is in favor of human cloning.
Claim - Cloning embryos is good because it could lead to medical advances and relieve suffering. (Claim = 6)
Data - (1) Cloning can increase changes of success of in vitro-fertilization.

(Possible warrant - Since this technique is so expensive and has such a low success rate, it could lower the costs and raise reliability of the procedure).

(2) Storage of embryo can help women in case of chemotherapy.

(Possible warrant - This would mean chemotherapy would not end her chances of fertility.)

(3) Can be used in screening in embryos for birth defects. (Data = 4)

(Possible warrant - Destroying a clone is less traumatic and ethically more acceptable than the destroying the original embryo.

Warrants - (Warrants = 0).

Because Cynde's editorial also clearly stated her position, that cloning could contribute to many medical advances, her claim was rated a 6. She earned a 4 for data because, although she provided three good arguments to support her claim, she could have provided more information, for example, about just exactly what in-vitro fertilization is. She received a 0 for warrants, because, as her outline reveals, she had no warrants to really lock the reader into her viewpoint. My outline includes possible warrants to show how much more effective the essay could be were they included. (Previous research (author, 1992) has shown that students have a much more difficult time with warrants than with any other aspect of persuasive writing. See author (1993) for a discussion of the reasons for this.)

CONCLUSION

This instrument pinpoints the strengths and weaknesses at all the various levels of editorials. Getting a breakdown of this information by means of this primary-trait scoring instrument helps students see why and where their compositions are not as convincing as they could be and helps teachers identify where they should concentrate their remedial efforts. Giving a holistic grade, even with copious comments, may not inform the student of strengths and weaknesses as clearly as this instrument does.

APPENDIX 1. CRITERIA FOR JUDGING QUALITY OF CLAIMS, DATA, AND WARRANTS

CLAIM - conclusions whose merits we are seeking to establish and assertions put forward for general acceptance

0 No clear position exists of the writer's assertion, preference, or view and context does not help clarify it.

2 Writer's position is poorly formulated but reader is reasonably sure what the paper is about because of context.

4 A topic sentence exists and reader is reasonably sure what the paper is about on the strength of the topic sentence alone, regardless of context.

6 A very clear, concise position is given as a topic sentence. The reader is very certain what paper is about.

DATA - support in the form of experience, facts, statistics, or occurrences.

0 No data are offered that are relevant to the claim.

2 Scant data (one or two pieces) are offered but what exist are usually relevant to claim. Irrelevant data are excluded.

4 Numerous pieces of data (minimum three) in support of the claim are offered. They are relevant but not necessarily convincing or complete. The writer leaves much for the reader to infer from the data. The writer may offer data which are not complete enough to allow the reader to determine their significance.

6 Numerous pieces of data (minimum three) are complete and accurate as well as explicitly and convincingly connected to the claim.

WARRANT - amplification or further explanation of *data*

0 No warrant is offered.

2 An attempt is made to elaborate at least one element of the data but the reader is left to infer more.

4 More than one piece of data is explained but the explanation is weak or lacks thoroughness.

6 The writer explains data in such a way that it is clear how they support the data. At least one piece of data is convincing and complete.

APPENDIX 2

Steve's Essay

It may finally come to pass as so many other "science fiction" ideas have. Man has learned to fly, go to outer space, create hybrid flowers and organisms, and now we may have the biggest ingredient of science fiction come true: HUMAN CLONING.

We have to be very careful with human cloning, it could get out of hand, like many other experiments gone awry. Once it has been discovered and employed, man has the ultimate power.

What if this power would fall into the wrong hands?

What if Hitler had this power?

What if the fat computer hacker in Jurassic Park actually got away with the stolen vials of genes?

We need to further delve into these "what ifs" before we take the final step in man creating man.

Don't worry, the day is not upon us yet, but it is closing in. Dr. Robert J. Stillman at the George Washington University Medical Center in Washington, D.C., has recently been able to split 17 abnormal human embryos into 48 single cells. A few of these cells actually reached the 32 cell stage in an artificial gel coating, but the cells only lived for six days before dying. The deaths could be attributed to the cells being abnormal to begin with.

Researchers are able to genetically clone organisms from the micro level on up, but humans are far more complicated than that. It could take years and years, but human cloning is on the way.

What if they screw up?

What could Stephen King to with this?

On a much simpler level than RNA, DNA and gene splitting we have screwed up just with intentional species introductions. The water hyacinth was introduced into Florida as a decorative water plant, and later introduced into the wild, which it took over. Now ponds and lakes in the region are literally being choked by the renegade plant.

Next we imported what turned out to be the scourge of Florida, the nutria. This furry, beaver-looking animal was introduced to the region to get rid of the water hyacinth because it feeds on the plant.

The little rodent also took over the region and has become a bigger problem than rats ever were in Florida.

Even when we experiment with importing god-made creatures, the results can be far from what was expected. When we experiment with human-altered beings we may be getting in over our heads.

Sure we can grow bigger, tastier, redder apples by genetically altering the plants, but an apple is a far cry from a human being.

Man is always going forward. That is how America and the speed of sound were discovered. Progress is fine, but we must know when to draw the line.

That line is now.

Cynde's Essay

Last week the New York Times exposed a seemingly modest fertility breakthrough, launching the biggest ethical debate in medicine since the first test tube baby 15 years ago.

The first cloning of a human embryo was performed by two George Washington University scientists at the American Fertility Society in Montreal three weeks ago.

Since the Times broke the news, we've heard the cries from ethicists who have conjured up such Brave New World/Jurassic Park nightmares as baby farms and embryo factories which mass produce human spare parts.

But under tight regulation by the creation of a presidential commission, cloning of human embryos could lead to important medical advances and relieve human suffering within the next couple of years.

Ironically, cloning is a relatively simple procedure that has been performed for years with plants, pigs, cows and rabbits. In fact, cloning cattle is a booming business in the United States.

Cloning occurs naturally when a woman conceives identical twins. To clone humans, scientists divide cells in two and coat with an artificial additive. The cells then continue to multiply.

The most immediate way cloning can be helpful is with in-vitro fertilization. This is the primary reason cloning was designed. A woman with one embryo has a 10-20 percent chance of

getting pregnant through in-vitro fertilization. But by cloning the embryo three or four times, her chance of being impregnated increases tremendously.

Cloning can be applied to other ethical medical practices as well. A woman who is about to undergo chemotherapy or another procedure which would render her sterile could have an embryo cloned and stored for future use.

Cloning can also be used when screening embryos at risk for inherited diseases, such as cystic fibrosis or hemophilia. The current screening technique involves a procedure which can be terminal to the embryo. But by having a clone around to test for the disorder, there is no harm done.

There is a real fear that cloning will go too far. Women who wish to have a child though artificial insemination have catalogs available that list the qualities of the donors. There is even a catalog made up solely of Nobel prize winners! But , with cloning, many suspect that someday greedy entrepreneurs will sell the embryos of these Nobel prize winners.

That is why government regulation is important. More than 25 countries have commissions that set guidelines on the advancement of reproductive technology. Under President Carter, a similar commission was developed to make policy on the most controversial of medical issues, such as euthanasia.

We are in the dawn of the eugenics era. Under the supervision of the commission formed by President Clinton, infertile couples will be able to increase their chances of conceiving a

child and we will have the peace of mind knowing that this new technology will not be abused.

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